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ABSTRACT

The steps to building a community playground are discussed. These steps include planning, materials and services needed, and the involvement of parents, teachers, and administrators as well as the children themselves. Pictures illustrate the text. (DB)

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BUILDING A PLAYGROUND

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Along with the joys of our modern, mechanized society come many destructive influences. One of these is the destruction of interesting play spaces for children. If we were to contrast the way we spent our outdoor play hours when we were children with the way our children do today, we would be shocked at the meager play space and material we provide for them. When I ask people where they played as children, some of the answers I get are:

"In the back yard and in the alley--I used to like to watch the ants crawling around the broken bottles."

"There were two roads. Down one road you would go to catch turtles, and down the other to catch snakes."

"The best thing we did was to go down by the river where nobody ever was. We dug out houses, sometimes with several rooms, in the river bank. We'd put blankets and pillows in them. We'd cover them up with leaves or boards so no one could find them. It was cool in there, quiet, dark. I wish I had that house now, sometimes."

"We played mostly in the vacant lot across the street."

As the concentration of both structures and people increases in urban, rural and suburban environments, we are rapidly eliminating the places and materials we used as children to create a rich variety of play situations. Quite simply, children no longer have available to them the open spaces and the odds and ends about the home that they would have had thirty years ago. The materials we were able to convert by invention and fantasy have been replaced by plastic toys, by discount store swings in back yards and by school play yards, with yellow lines on paved black top.

Such stock items limit the meaningful play possibilities for children outdoors. The loss of free play space has damaged our children and fostered among us self-justifying ideas about the "right" use of the formal playground: it is supposed to be an exercise yard where children can let off steam so they can settle back into "earnest" learning when they return to the school building. Although we sense that this is not right, few of us do anything about it. As parents, we continue to buy meaningless and useless toys for our children, and as educators, we largely ignore the potential for learning outdoors--literally outside the doors of schools and other buildings.

But we are continually being reminded by children of our mistake: consider the wholesale disrespect for what we provide as play materials for them. For example, if a playground has nothing in it intended for the child to alter (that is, to move for himself or to shape to conform with his play ideas), he will alter what has been provided. It is common to see broken playground equipment. When it is replaced by supposedly indestructable equipment, this too is broken. When there is nothing left to break, then various objects from the neighborhood are carried into the playground, broken there, and left to fill up the space. The word commonly used to describe this activity is vandalism.

In fact, if we evaluate playgrounds by performance, they are lousy to play in but great to vandalize. Why? Clearly, when a small child breaks a toy with the intent to do something to it, he is no vandal, he is not destroying. Rather, he is exercising his curiosity in a positive way, by creating a new object out of an old one that has ceased to interest him. Children require constant challenge to their minds as well as their bodies: indeed these two go together. Play materials for children of all ages must be designed to serve curiosity, enhance it and provide for its useful and varied extensions. A playground must supply a variety of materials for a variety of human beings. It cannot be bought and installed as a package, not from Sears for $30, or from New York playground designers for $25,000.

Our challenge, as parents and as teachers, is to counteract mere objects with living relationships. But so often when we buy a child something, our concern ends with the purchase: we see him out on his new swing, bike, skate board, or wagon and feel we have done our bit. Educators, too, get into the habit of buying packages of learning (audio labs, water play tanks, kits,etc.) and often fail to watch for and to guide the developing relationship between child and object.

In order to build interesting play areas for children, in either the city or the small town, we adults must be thoroughly involved, teachers and parents alike. We must be willing to participate in the development of flexible materials and environments and interested in how our children shape them.

There is currently in this country a revolution in the design of new playground spaces. This revolution acknowledges the changes already common in those other parts of the world where playgrounds are given more attention than we give them here. However, little has been done to create programs for realizing these new play spaces. My own interest has been in putting these two things together. To build challenging new spaces and at the same time to help people develop programs to go with them makes more sense to me than to try to do either of these interdependent activities separately.

This paper represents the present level of achievement of myself and my colleagues of the Early Childhood Education Study of Education Development Center, Newton, Mass., who over this last year have done considerable playground building. Most of the work has been aimed at pulling together teachers, parents and school administrators in situations where major efforts could be made to develop community built playgrounds with continuing programs.

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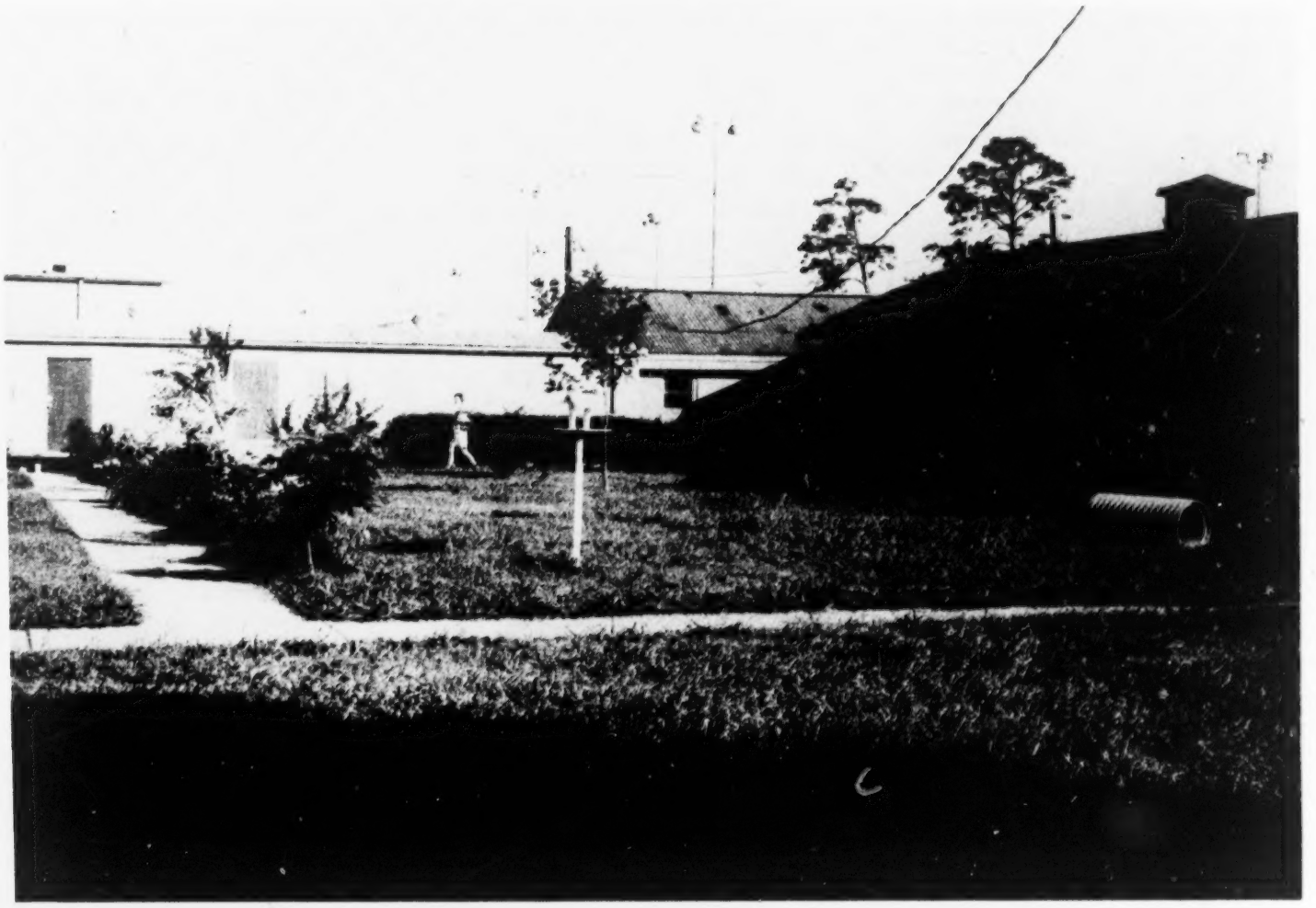

A GOOD PLACE TO START

A good place to start is to go out and measure roughly what you have for space. Make a sketch marking all the predominant features--trees, rocks, etc. If you are a teacher and want to get started, send the sketch home to parents with a letter asking what they did as children that they really enjoyed that might be added to this play yard. If you are a parent, do the same thing and send copies also to the teacher and school administrator. The sampling of ideas you get back from people will probably cover a variety of interesting things, the applicability of some of which may baffle you. If your play yard is black top, but someone says he had a great time digging holes as a child, rather than say, "Well, that isn't possible here," begin to think about getting some dirt and tools to dig with into that yard. The same holds for hills, water, tires, boats and treehouses.

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Call a meeting of interested people and talk it over. Discuss what the possibilities are for your playground and what commonsense safety limitations should be. An element of danger is always present in any playground and must be dealt with; but don't just automatically turn away from situations that simply look risky. Examine them for what they really are. For example, we at ECES have created a set of slides showing children at play that we use at meetings like these. One slide that's always good for generating discussion shows a very small child prying up a very big rock with an adult-size shovel. Some people have thought this pretty dangerous. They say they would have removed the rock from the playground, and certainly would not have allowed so small a child to use an adult shovel. But the slide shows, upon examination, that this child is in no physical danger, and is learning about levers. For real learning to take place in this situation, you have to have that big a rock in order to feel the effect of applying leverage, and that strong a lever--any child-size shovel would have snapped.

In this context, it is well to remember that playgrounds can serve a great function in providing safe play for children, but the space you build must be interesting enough to compete successfully with the vacant buildings, river banks, stone quarries and alleys that will otherwise attract them with their danger and challenge.

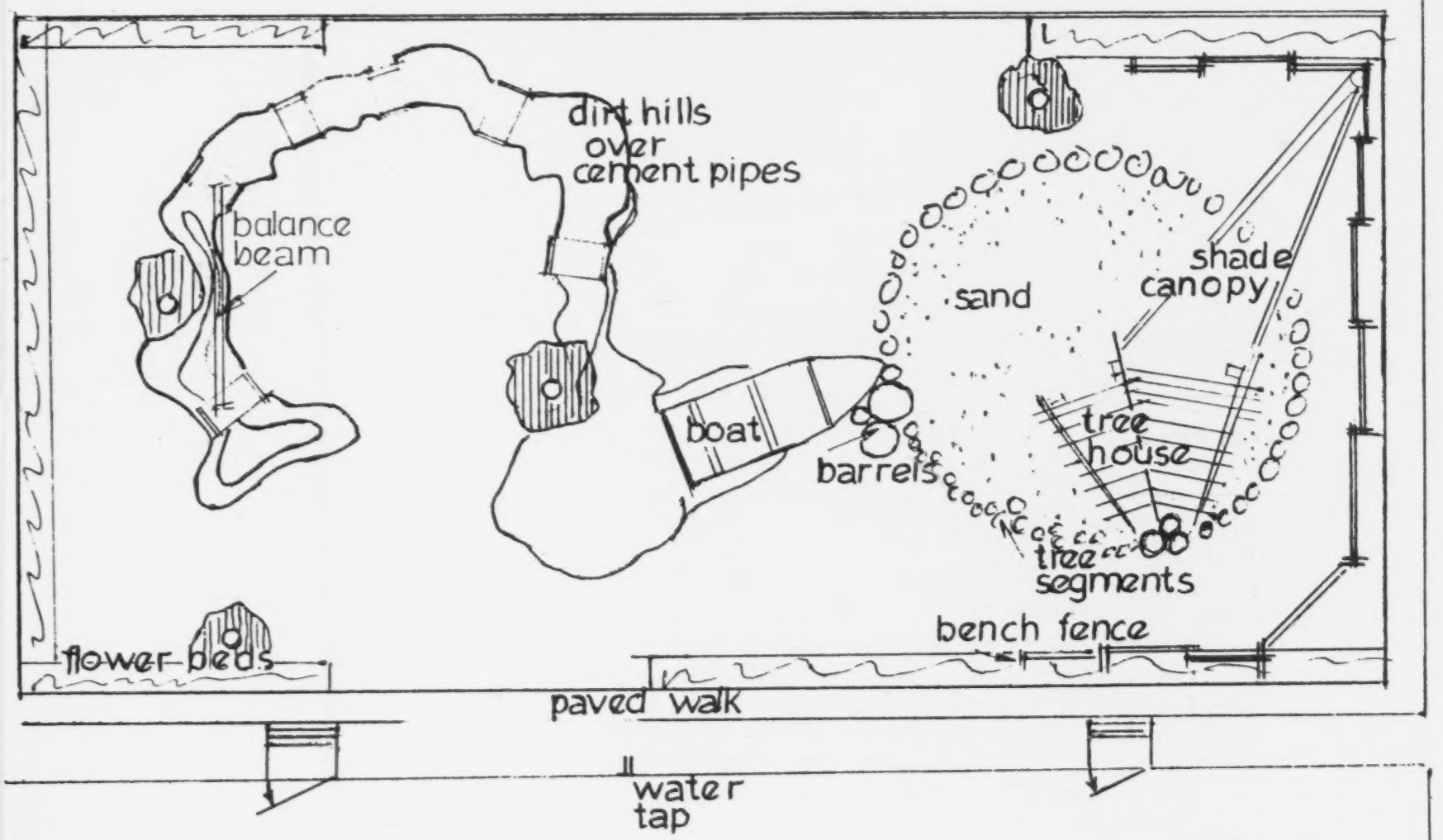
From these talks, lists can be made of the possibilities, and of the free or inexpensive materials and services available locally. Such a list might look like this:

materials	sources
dirt for digging	contractors for roads
front loader for moving dirt	a parent, the city
sand	a cement company
lumber	contractor or demolished buildings
cement pipes for tunnels	local manufacturer, the city
large wire spools	electric company
boat	parent, boat yards
tree segments	the city

You are now ready to put the ideas and resources together into a plan. For the purpose of illustration I will use one developed at a recent playground workshop at Texas Southern University.

In developing a playground, some design considerations come into play. Which area should be made for loud and running play, and which for quiet, dramatic play and for reading? One requires sun and open space, the other shade and intimacy. You should try to place the active areas away from the quiet ones. In this plan, the sand area becomes the center for the dramatic play materials; the areas under the tree house provide intimate scaling for the child as well as shade. By combining these elements we were able to develop an organic area with activities that complement one another. Although the sand is the unifying factor, we have expanded greatly from the typical sandbox into an area of interesting and interlocking functions. Tangent to this space is the water play area. It consists of a boat set into the ground close to a water outlet with a hose. This particular boat is plastic, and leaks very nicely, allowing us to run water in to make a splash pool without creating a stagnant pond. The rest of the playground, beyond the boat, is a complex of hills over cement pipes, and provides the open, loud and running rough-play area.

Sometimes it helps, when you are working up a plan, to describe various areas of the playground in terms of the sensory activities that children could be involved in there. Some words you might find handy are: crawling, growing, smelling, touching, pretending, sailing, splashing, digging, climbing, building, jumping, rolling, seeing, falling, messing, cleaning, smearing, ripping, straining, balancing, dancing, pushing, lifting, sorting, wiggling, listening, wading, running, chasing, hiding, laughing, crying, helping, hurting, winning, losing, waiting, circling, stopping, propping, bouncing, wishing, fishing, fashioning, etc. Thinking in these terms may help you imagine the many ways the children will find to put the playground to use.



mo del play yard
head start training prgm
texas southern univ.

scale 1" = 10'

After the working drawing is completed, a construction and materials procurement plan is made. Its purpose is to match materials and tools with personnel for the fullest utilization of each. It's poor planning to have thirty people ready to dig a hole, and only one shovel on hand; it's equally bad to have thirty shovels, and one person to dig. In the playground plan shown we organized groups to search for materials. (In this program everyone was new to the area, Houston.) What follows is the report of each of the various materials procurement groups:

The group looking for 28" concrete pipe made twelve calls and found a person who referred them to a pipe manufacturer. He gave them the pipe we needed and delivered it to the center.

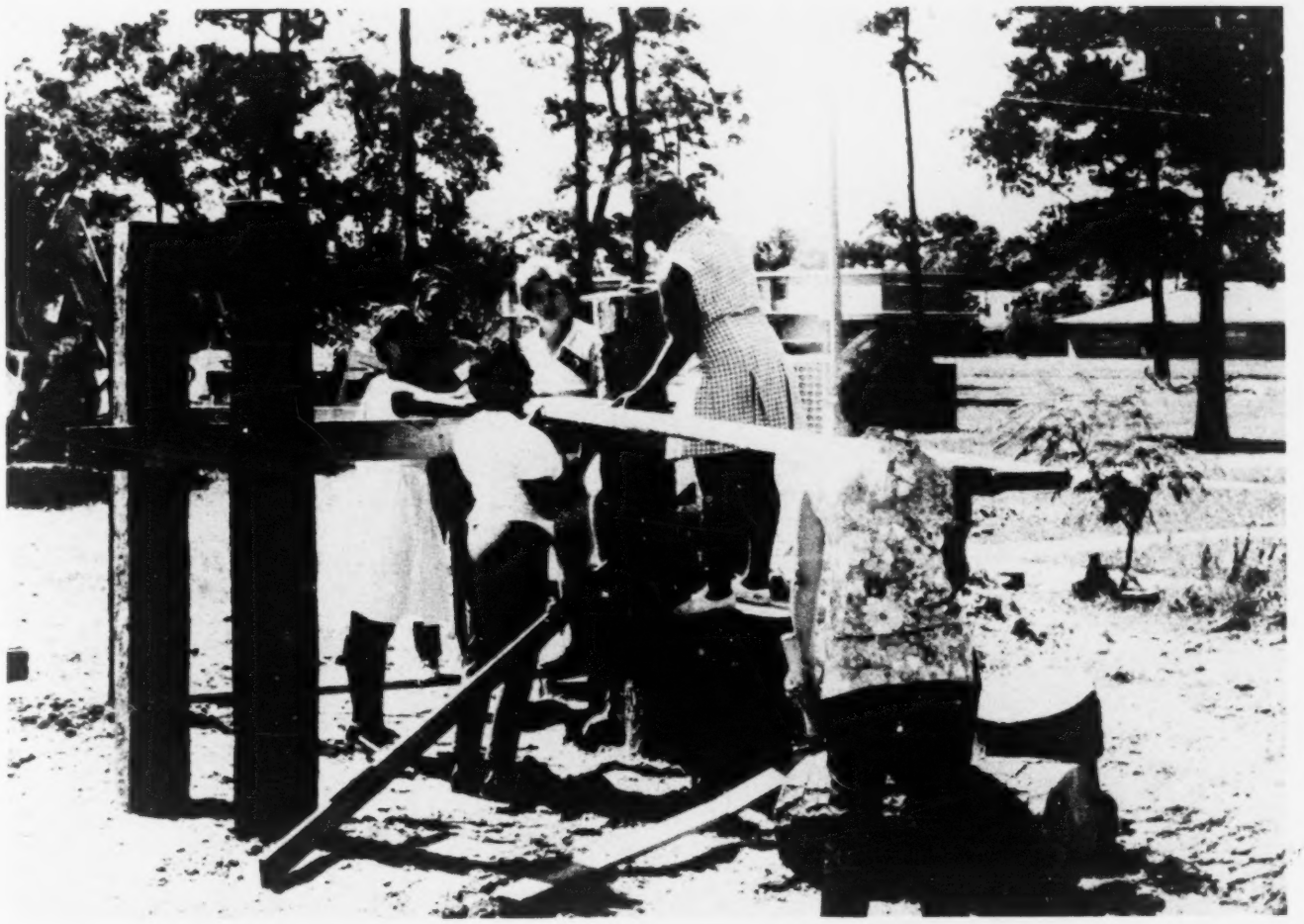
The group looking for railroad ties called three places and located some ties at the rail yards adjacent to the Houston Port Authority. We went to pick them up with a truck from the university, only to realize that fishing them out of a pile of scrap ties would be almost impossible. However, luck was with us, and along came a car down the track filled with just what we were looking for. The worker on the car kindly took his crane and filled our truck with ties. In the future it would be wise to plan to get ties at the time that man is coming down the track, as our luck won't hold forever.

The telephone pole and lumber group found a local contractor who supplied both items in quantity. In fact, all the lumber we used was donated. For tree segments we were lucky to have nearby a sizeable dead pine the Grounds Department was glad to be rid of. Some of the dirt we dug up in creating the sand and boat area and we bought the sand by the truckload.

One group, by phoning local boat manufacturers and supply yards, located a company that had a boat with a hole in it. They gave it to us--of no use to them, it was just fine for our purposes.

By the day the outside work was to be begun, all the materials were ready to be delivered or picked up as we needed them. The location of materials had taken an afternoon; the picking up and delivery took a day and a half.

This plan required moving a lot of earth and sand, so a front loader was rented, and I think proved well worth its cost--about $70 a day. The changes you can make in the topography by creating hills and valleys are really the most essential element in improving a play space. The sewer pipes should be delivered in advance of the earth moving equipment. They can be put in place, so when the dirt or sand is brought in by truck it can be dumped directly on them, leaving only the shaping of the hills to be done by shovel and rake. If you dig out a big sand area, as we did here, this soil can be the starter for the hills over the pipes.



When the lumber arrived we were far enough ahead with the cutting and planting of the tree segments--which served as posts--so that we could immediately start building the platforms of our tree house. At this middle point in the development of the area there were odds and ends of work available for almost everyone--cutting tree segments, moving earth, shoveling and raking hills, digging holes for tree posts, building the tree houses, cutting railway ties for fence segments and grading the area around the boat. It is during this period that you should plan to have the bulk of the building crew show up; at both the start and end of the building, there are simply not enough jobs to go around for a large crew.

By day two we had finished the area and were ready to see children use it. It is not unusual to be able to build a drastically revised play yard in two days if you can plan to have everything and everyone there at the right time. Having completed the initial work on the physical space, however, you are now just ready to begin the real work--developing the use of the facility for children.

What we did in Houston was to get the children in for a day and play with them, looking carefully at what interested them and how they used the space. For the classroom teacher using a play yard, this would be a continuing process in which, over a period of time, a program could be developed. In this situation, we had time only to make a few observations, the most obvious ones to be sure, but even these would have escaped the teacher who simply lets his children loose into a play area and disappears.

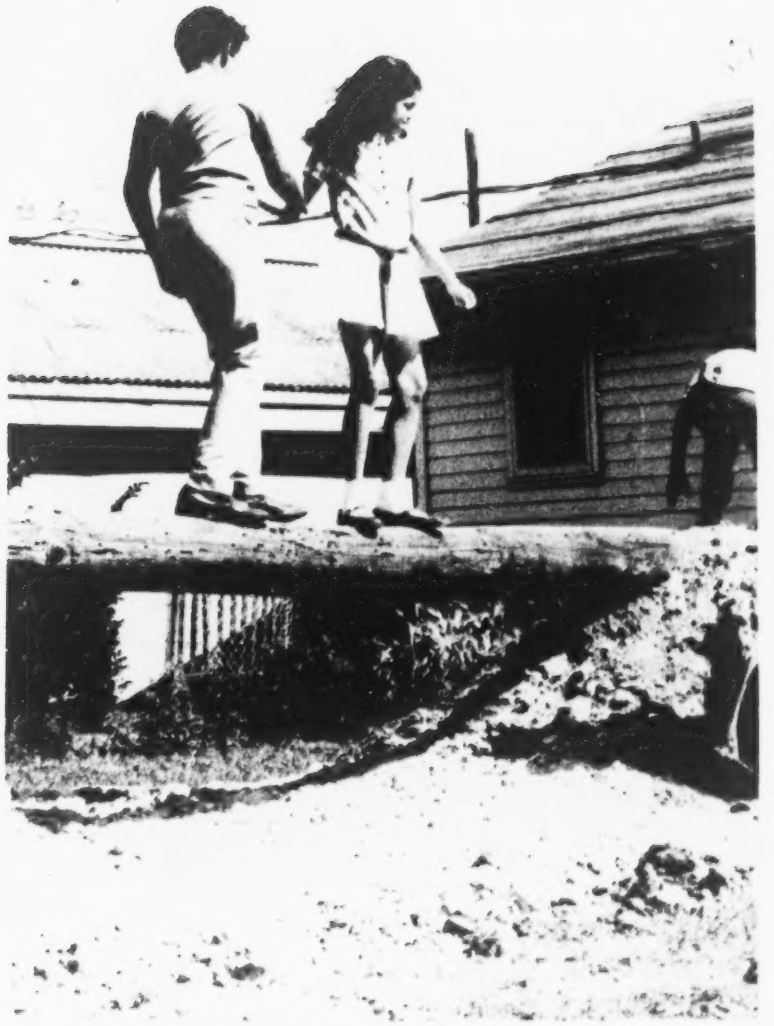
When the children came, they were allowed to take off their shoes and socks--the area, except for the hills and sand, was in grass. They tried things out: the boat, the hills, and the balance board beam.

One group of children immediately encamped under the lowest portion of the tree house to play in the sand, and a wise teacher rushed off to bring them an assortment of spoons, plastic dishes, and pans. This simple addition of materials was essential, yet most of the workshop participants were slow in realizing it. They had expected the kids just to run all over, but some of them settled into very earnest play in a small, quiet place, ignoring the more spectacular parts of the playground. From this we learned that we needed more shade for the sand area and the next day we added a colorful orange canopy made from a government surplus parachute.

For the water play area we needed materials for carrying water to other parts of the playground, and tools for digging little canals. For the hilly areas we needed large crates and boards so the children could build out from the hills, creating little lean-to complexes of their own design. We lacked all sorts of tools, wheels, toys, balls, etc. The list is endless.

Over a period of time, the teacher, if he carefully watches his children at play and is on the look out for materials that can extend their play environment, will complement the basic physical changes made in the larger workshop. This can lead to an even more varied and individualized program. But at no time can it be assumed that a physical plant in itself will operate self-sufficiently.

In my work I have emphasized the building of materials as a first step in helping teachers and parents (in their capacity as teachers) to become aware of their own potential to alter and improve the learning environment. I have faith that this experience will awaken in them a broadened sense of how they can participate in their children's growth.



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